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SECOND EDITION.

"The Oldest House in the United States"

St. Augustine, Fla.

An examination of the St. Augustine Historical Society's claim that its house on St. Francis Street was built in the year 1565 by the Franciscan Monks

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SECOND EDITION.

The Examination was first published in May of this year. This second printing contains new material which will be of interest even to those who saw the first edition.

On the back cover is given an extract from the Armistice Day address of Dr. Andrew Anderson, as printed in the Evening Record. There speaks the true St. Augustine. When the city thus asserts its dignity and self-respect and proclaims the truth through the lips of one whose words not even the Historical Society may gainsay, how contemptible, how indefensible are the frauds and the fakers seen to be.



"The Oldest House in the United States"

THE PURPOSE OF THE INQUIRY.

ST. AUGUSTINE is famed as the oldest town in the United States. Because of its age one looks for old things. The visiting tourist expects to find relics of the distant past, material tokens of the city's romantic history. But except for the Fort, the Gateway and the narrow streets, there are no such reminders here. In the absence of genuine antiquities, mercenary ingenuity has invented spurious ones. The stranger knowing no better accepts the false for the true.

Under these circumstances an extensive and flourishing system of faking has been developed to coax the coin from the winter tourist. As a rule, the inventors and promoters of the fakes are not natives nor old-time residents. Not being of St. Augustine stock, they have no pride in the town to make them jealous of its good name. They are not in the least troubled that their dishonest practices give the town notoriety as a city of fakes.

The St. Augustine Historical Society, which exploits the most impudent of the several oldest house fakes, is of this class. Its activities are directed by persons who are not citizens of the town and show no sense of responsibility for maintaining the town's good repute. So that they get the profit, they apparently care nothing for the disgrace their enterprise brings on the city.

They tell their revenue-producing lies with such assurance and repetition that some of the home folks themselves after a time accept the frauds, and not only grant the fakers immunity, but when the fakes are attacked, rally to the defense of them and cry out that the business interests of the town are in jeopardy.

This was just what happened last winter when I published an article on the "Fakes of St. Augustine," and at the next meeting of the Board of Trade excited members (including the City Manager) took the floor to denounce the "attack," and at a meeting of the Historical Society the wail went up that "every business interest of St. Augustine had been damaged." The fakes, it will be noted, are "business interests."

In the spring of 1920, visiting St. Augustine after an absence of some years, I found flourishing there three varieties of fakes for tourists. In the Florida Standard Guide and in an article in Mr. Foster's Travel Magazine (January, 1921) I described what I had seen and heard—the Ponce de Leon mission cross fake, the string of lies told by the Society's guide who conducted my party through the Fort, and two of the oldest house fakes, in particular that of the Historical Society on St. Francis street. Events in the city's history were recalled and his-

torical authorities were cited to demonstrate that the Ponce de Leon mission and the oldest house were fictions; and the suggestion was made that the mercenary deceptions ought to be suppressed for the sake of the city's good name.

The action which followed on the part of the Historical Society was reported in the St. Augustine Evening Record of March 9:

"At a regular meeting of the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science, held in the reading rooms of the Hotel Ponce de Leon Tuesday evening, Chauncey M. Depew, of New York, president of the organization, presided, and . . . put the question, unanimously carried, placing the Society on record as not disposed to dignify the alleged slanderous articles of C. B. Reynolds with a reply, but to again assert to the world the belief of the St. Augustine Historical Society members that the dates and data it sets forth are right and correct, cannot be disproved, and are as near the facts as true lovers of history can establish from meagre historical records and priceless traditions handed down from father to son."

The Record of April 12th published a letter in which I said:

"I assume that we are all sincerely desirous of establishing the truth about the Historical Society's house on St. Francis street and about the Ponce de Leon coquina cross. As one step toward that end I suggest that a committee of investigation be selected, say of five members, three to be named by the Historical Society and the Board of Trade and two by me. My only stipulation is that no individual who is personally making money out of the Society's activities shall have place on the committee. I will very gladly submit my evidences, drawn from the contemporaneous records of the time, which I think will show beyond any dispute the falsity of the claims which have been called in question by me, namely, that the house on St. Francis street was built by Franciscan monks in 1565, and that the coquina cross belonged to a religious mission established by Ponce de Leon in 1513.

"I invite the Historical Society and the Board of Trade to join with me in such an endeavor to establish the truth, and I request that the findings of the committee may be given publication in the Record."

And I added that I thought I had "a right to expect the support of the citizens of the town, the Board of Trade and all members of the Historical Society who are solicitous for the ascertainment of the truth."

The Historical Society and the Board of Trade having declined my invitation for an inquiry into the truth of the matters under review, I am now submitting to a wider consideration, with respect to the St. Francis street house, what I had intended to lay before the committee. In essential respects it is a repetition of what was said in the article on "The Fakes of St. Augustine," but with more detail and with citations of chapter and verse for the historical sources quoted.

THE HOUSE ON ST. FRANCIS STREET.

In the year 1882 G. F. Acosta, administrator of the estate of Mrs. E. A. Acosta, petitioned the Court for an order to sell the lot at the corner of Marine and St. Francis streets, for the benefit of the infant owners. The petition drawn by his attorney, C. M. Cooper, set up that the large lot had its greatest value from its frontage on Marine street, that it was vacant except for an old dilapidated house rented to negroes, "from which no more had been received than money to pay the taxes, and at times not enough to pay the taxes," and that "the property as it stands yields no rent."

The Court having granted the order of sale, the lot was sold; the building on it was rehabilitated from its negro occupancy, and was enlarged, extended both on the east and on the west, and variously altered. Shortly thereafter it was used by the new owner for the business of oldest house. Succeeding owners exploited it for the same purpose, and in 1918 the business was taken over by the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science. Because of the prestige given by its name the Society has largely developed the business, for the popular notion of a historical society leads the average person to accept as fact what such a society says on a historical subject. The tens of thousands of persons who have visited the Society's house on St. Francis street presumably have believed the statement because made by a "historical society," that the house was built by Franciscan monks in 1565 and is the oldest house in the United States.

Like every historical assertion made by a historical society, this one is a legitimate subject of examination, to test its accuracy. Such an examination if thoroughly and honestly made will disclose whether the Society's claim for the antiquity of the house is based on historic truth, or whether the building in its character of "oldest house" is the fake that I said it was in my article on "The Fakes of St. Augustine."

It is such an inquiry that I propose to make in the pages which follow.

THE SOCIETY'S CLAIMS RESPECTING THE HOUSE.

Concerning its house the St. Augustine Historical Society makes the following assertions:

The sign on the outside of the building at the entrance reads:

"The Oldest House in the United States under three flags, St. Francis Street, St. Augustine, Florida.

"It is recorded in the archives of the Church that this house was occupied by the monks of St. Francis from 1565 to 1590.

"The chapel they used can still be seen.

"In 1590 it came into possession of a deputy of the Spanish Government and descended in the same family until 1882. The present owner has documents proving this."

In the circular distributed to tourists is said:

"The Oldest House was erected in the year 1565 by the Franciscan monks. There are other old houses, but this is the OLDEST. To avoid being disappointed, look for the sign on the door. 'Oldest House in the U. S., property of Historical Society of St. Augustine.' If you do not see this sign, you are not at the oldest house, on St. Francis street."

The booklet sold in the house and elsewhere, entitled "Souvenir of the Two Oldest Relics in the United States," sets forth:

"OLDEST HOUSE IN THE UNITED STATES,

"ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA.

"This building is owned by the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science.

"It was used by the monks who came with Pedro Menendez, the founder of St. Augustine, in 1565, and was occupied by them until the completion of the larger coquina monastery across the street in 1590.

"From that time until comparatively recent years it has been the home of many noted Spanish, English and American families.

"After a careful investigation extending over more than a year, of records, data and maps, from Spain, the British Museum and the archives at Washington, the antiquity of this building was established to the satisfaction of the Historical Society and Institute of Science, and in order that it might be properly preserved for future generations, was purchased by it on November 15, 1918.

"The walls of the house are of coquina and the lower floors of coquina mortar.

"The largest room on the upper floor was the chapel. At the rear of the upper floor is a small room in which the monks slept. [The lec-

turer adds that the monks contemplated the coffin-shaped ceiling for penance.]

"In the main living room is a very large open fireplace, which now, as in the days of long ago, radiates a cheerful glow on cool days.

"The old circular well at the rear of the house, blessed by the Franciscan monks, has a never-ending interest for the tourist. There is a tradition that he who makes a wish while looking into this well will have it granted within a year."

A sign on the wall in the large upper room tells us:

"This room was the chapel used by the Franciscan monks from 1565 to 1590. The floor and ceiling are original and of cedar."

There is shown a prie dieu or prayer bench which the souvenir booklet explains "was used by the Franciscan monks during their occupancy of this house."

The Society says that traditions attaching to the house justify its claims of age for the building.

SOME HELPFUL DATES.

- 1565. Pedro Menendez establishes St. Augustine.
- 1586. Francis Drake burns St. Augustine.
- 1665. John Davis burns St. Augustine.
- 1702. Governor Moore burns St. Augustine.
- 1763. Florida is ceded to Great Britain. Spanish leave. English occupy St. Augustine.
- 1783. Florida is retroceded to Spain. English leave. Spanish occupy St. Augustine.
- 1821. Florida ceded to United States. Spanish leave. St. Augustine becomes an American town.

THE RECORDS.

The year 1565, when the Society says its house was built, was the year in which Pedro Menendez de Aviles established Fort St. Augustine. It was long ago, but the records of the time are available. Contemporary accounts were written by Mendoza (1), who was Menendez's chaplain, and by Meras (2), brother-in-law of Menendez and official chronicler of the enterprise. Menendez (3) himself wrote long letters to the King and to others. Barrientos (4), who was a friend of Menendez's, wrote a history based on Menendez's own official report to the King. Barcia (5) in a later work drew his material from original sources. The "Unwritten History" compiled by Miss A. M. Brooks (6) contributes to our information. In these several records may be found material to determine the points at issue.

(1) Relacion hecha por el Capellan de Armada Francisco Lopez de Mendoza, del viaje que hizo el Adelantado Pedro Menendez de Aviles a la Florida.

(2) Memorial que hizo el Doctor Gonzalo Solis de Meras de todas las jornadas y sucesos del Adelantado Pedro Menendez de Aviles, su cuñado, y de la Conquista de la Florida y Justicia que hizo en Juan Ribao y otros franceses.

(3) Cartas de Pedro Menendez de Aviles.

The three foregoing are reprinted in Eugenio Rudiaz y Caravia's "La Florida, su conquista y colonizacion por Pedro Menendez de Aviles," Madrid, 1893. The references to the several works are to the pages of the Rudiaz volumes in which they are printed.

(4) Vida y hechos de Pero Menendez de Auiles... Compuesta por el maestro barrientos, Catredatico de salamanca, 1568. In Dos Antiquas Relaciones de la Florida publicalas por primera vez por Genaro Garcia, Mexico, 1902.

(5) Ensayo Cronologico para la Historia General de la Florida, por Don Gabriel de Cardenas z Cano [Barcia], Madrid, 1723.

(6) The Unwritten History of St. Augustine, copied from the Spanish Archives in Seville, Spain, by Miss A. M. Brooks, and translated by Mrs. Annie Averette, St. Augustine.

How the St. Augustine Historical Society esteemed the work of Miss Brooks was told by President De Witt Webb in his address before the Society, March 14, 1917: "In alluding to the early members of the Society, I should have mentioned as among the most active and valuable, the labors of Miss A. M. Brooks. Her book, 'The Unwritten History of St. Augustine,' is of the greatest value, and all her work for the Society... was devoted to its best interests." (Year Book, 1916-1917, page 8.)

(7) Souvenir of the Two Oldest Relics in the United States: Oldest House and Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Fla. Illustrated in colors with history. Published under the auspices of the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science. 1920. This is quoted, not for historical data, but for the Society's statements respecting the age of the house. The audacious mendacity of the booklet gives it an unique place among publications of historical societies.

EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIETY'S CLAIMS.

Claim A—That the house was built in 1565 by Franciscan Monks.

Menendez sailed from Cadiz June 29th, 1565, with eleven ships, in advance of the rest of the fleet. With him were seven priests, three of whom deserted at Porto Rico. (Mendoza, Vol. II, page 437.) He proceeded to Florida without waiting for the other squadrons.

The missionaries who were enlisted in the expedition, including eleven Franciscan friars and one lay brother, a friar of the Order of Mercy, a priest and eight members of the Order of Jesus, sailed later with Pedro Menendez Marquez and Esteban de las Alas. (Meras, Vol. I, page 63. Barcia, page 69.) They were delayed by storms and many of the ships turned back.

From St. Augustine Menendez went to Cuba in November, and wrote to the King from Matanzas, December 5: "I found at Havana Pedro Menendez Marquez, my cousin, with three ships. The fleet of Santo Domingo [that of Las Alas] up to this day has not arrived at Havana." (Menendez, Vol. II, page 110.) Las Alas reached Havana early in January. (Meras, Vol. I, page 149.) The record does not show how many of the Franciscans if any reached Havana with Menendez Marquez in December, 1565, or with Las Alas in January, 1566. That none came with Marquez is indicated by the fact that at the end of December Menendez sent Meras to New Spain to bring "some Franciscan friars and Dominicans for the conversion of the Indians"—*procurase traer algunos frayles franciscos y dominicos para la conversion de los indios*. Meras returned in July, 1566, without any Franciscans. (Barrientos, pages 83, 111.)

Further and conclusive evidence is contained in a letter written by Menendez from St. Augustine on October 15, 1566, to a Jesuit friend, in which he says: "I felt lost on finding that no members of the Religious order had arrived. . . I am sure that members of the Religious orders could accomplish more in one month teaching the Doctrine than military men can accomplish in many years. . . I have sent a few boys and soldiers to teach them the Christian Doctrine. . . It has been a great mistake that none of your Order *nor any other Religious* have come to teach them."—*Ninguno de Vuestras mercedes ni otros Religiosos*." (Historia de la Compañia de Jesus en la provincia de Toledo, tomo 2, folio 153.)

From all of which it is manifest that in 1565 there were no Franciscans in St. Augustine either to build the house or to occupy it. The Society's assertion that the house was built by Franciscan monks and occupied by them in 1565 is thus shown to be untrue.

CONDITIONS IN 1565 PRECLUDED HOUSE BUILDING.

Nor is it credible that the house should then have been built by others, for conditions at the post in 1565 were such as to preclude the work of constructing stone houses. St. Augustine was then a fortified camp, governed by the Maestre de Campo, the camp master. From the shelter of the camp the soldiers and others ventured at their peril because of the hostile Indians. They were in constant fear of the savages, short of rations, chronically hungry, mutinous and plotting to leave the country.

On October 15, 1565, Menendez wrote to the King: "From the burning of the Fort we suffer very great hunger, and the biscuit that was landed here is spoiling and being used up and unless we are speedily succored we shall suffer and many will pass out of this world from starvation." (Menendez, Vol. II, page 101.)

In November he went to Cuba for supplies. On December 5th he wrote from Matanzas to the King: "I shall do everything in my power to send on provisions for the people there . . . for they have nothing there to eat. . . Unless they can be succored or unless God sustains them, one of two things must happen, either they will perish with hunger or break with the Indians on account of taking food from them." (Menendez, Vol. II, page 106.) He despatched a ship from Havana with provisions and supplies.

On January 30, 1566, in a letter to the King he reported: "Two days ago arrived Captain Diego de Amaya, who sailed . . . with provisions for the Forts of St. Augustine and San Mateo, and he brought me news that he arrived safely at Fort St. Augustine . . . that in the cold of winter being ill clothed more than one hundred persons [at the two Forts] died, and that they were in very great necessity of food and still are." (Menendez, Vol. II, page 144.)

It is not to be believed that people who were starving, dodging Indians and plotting to get away, were over on Anastasia Island, quarrying coquina, transporting it across the bay and building houses of it.

While it is not to the purpose to follow the fortunes of St. Augustine during the years immediately succeeding, the fact is suggestive that the same conditions of hardship continued. In 1570, when Las Alas returned to Spain with some of his soldiers to report on the conditions then existing in Florida, Geronimo de Sobrado testified that there were divided among the three forts 150 soldiers, and in St. Augustine there were one married man and his wife. There were fifteen or sixteen mares in St. Augustine, and ten or twelve cows. "They cannot maintain them because the mosquitoes eat them up and the Indians kill them. There are no vegetables. There is fish, but those who go fishing are always in danger of being killed by the Indians." Francisco Duarte testified as to St. Augustine: "The soldiers are poorly armed. They

have used their armor for shirts, not having anything else to wear. They need everything. In San Pedro the soldiers are also naked. In Santa Elena the soldiers are in the same condition. Among all the fifty soldiers of each fort there are not six shirts — *no habia seis camisas* (Diligencias hechas en Sevilla con motivo de la venida de Esteban de las Alas, de la Florida. Ruidiaz, Vol. II, pp. 572-579).

Claim B—That the house built in 1565 was built here.

In 1565 there was no St. Augustine here. A house built in the St. Augustine of 1565 would have been built not here, but somewhere else, for St. Augustine then occupied a different site, as is shown by the records.

From Cuba where he had gone in 1565, Menendez sailed on February 25, 1566, to explore southern Florida. He returned to St. Augustine in March and afterwards went to visit San Mateo and Santa Elena. In May he returned to St. Augustine. Barrientos (page 115) records: "He arrived in St. Augustine on May 18th, his arrival causing much joy, for they certainly were much afflicted with hunger and worn out by the fighting with the Indians. Entering in council with the captains, it was agreed to move the Fort from there to the entrance of the inlet, because there the Indians could not do so much damage. and they could the better defend themselves against the entrance of enemy vessels. . . The following day they went to the inlet and traced the site of the Fort, which they began building with great industry . . . with an understanding of the haste required in building the Fort. They worked with perfect order, fearing the Indians would surprise and assault them. In ten days the defense was moderately secure, the artillery in position. Up to that time no vessel with the relief had arrived. They were in danger of starvation."

In May of the following year (1567) Menendez returned to Spain. Before sailing from St. Augustine he ordered the building and garrisoning of a number of blockhouses. One of these was to be erected at Palican on the Matanzas River, 5 leagues south of St. Augustine, another at Selo, and another in the old St. Augustine (*Sant Agustín el biejo*). The houses and people in Selo, old St. Augustine, Palican and Matanzas were to be subject and obedient to the Mayor and General of the (new) Fort of St. Augustine. (Barrientos, pages 141-2.)

The site of the first St. Augustine is not known. That it must have been at a distance from the new site, which was chosen in 1566, is indicated by the fact that it was so far away as to require its own fortification and garrison.

Wherever was the location, the record shows that a house built in the first "old" St. Augustine (*Sant Agustín el biejo*) of 1565 could not have been built here on the present St. Francis street in the second (1566) situation of the settlement.

Claim C—That the house was built of coquina in 1565.

Coquina is a building stone quarried on Anastasia Island across the bay opposite the town.

A house in the St. Augustine of 1565 would have been built of wood, for coquina was then unknown. The rock was not discovered until 1580.

In the Archives of the Indies (*Relaciones de los Sucesos en la Florida*) it is recorded under the year 1580 that "Martinez Avendaño, being Governor of Florida, wrote to the King: 'I have to inform your Majesty that on the Island called Anastasia we have discovered a rock or stone of shell formation of which there will be enough to build the foundation of the Fort.'" This record Mrs. Annie Averette tells me was copied by Miss A. M. Brooks from the original in Seville.

Among the Brooks transcripts in the Library of Congress is a letter written from St. Augustine, December 27, 1583, to the King, by Governor Pedro Menendez Marquez, in which he says:

"About three years since I went to an Indian town four leagues from this, where I found an abundance of stone, near the sea. After I had received the royal cedula from Y. M., it occurred to me that it would be useful; so afterward I went to see it, with a few persons from here who understand something about it. From appearances there is a large quantity, but not enough to make a great fortress. It is very soft, but withal will be profitable for the foundation, which will be adapted to the natural condition of the ground. I will endeavor to have some of it brought here, when the negroes are not otherwise employed."

In the house on St. Francis street, which it says was built of coquina in 1565, the Historical Society sells a booklet containing a chronological table. One entry in the table reads: "1580—Coquina discovered on Anastasia Island."

It follows that inasmuch as coquina had not then been found, the house was not built of coquina in 1565 by Franciscan monks or any other builders.

If the house had been built of wood in 1565, twenty years afterward it would have been burned.

In 1586, on his way home from the West Indies, Francis Drake found a wooden town here. Writes Thomas Cates, who chronicled the voyage: "Going a mile up or somewhat more by the River side, we might descerne on the other side of the River over against us, a fort, which newly had bene built by the Spaniards, and some mile or there about, above the fort, was a little town or village without wals, built of wooden houses, as this plot here doth plainly shew." The "foote of the fort Wall was all massive timber of great trees like mastes."

(Summarie and True Discourse of Sir Francis Drake's West-Indian Voyage, 1590, pages 34, 35.) A note on the "plot" says: "The fort was called Saint John de Pinos, which afterward we burned." They then took "the town of St. Augustine, which being won at our departure was burned to the ground." The account in De Bry describes the town as built of wooden houses—*ligneis aedibus exstructa*, and says it was entirely destroyed by the English by fire—*ab Ingliš igne injecto plane devastata est*. De Bry's *Americæ, Pars VIII, Continens Descriptionem Trium Itinerum. . . Francisci Draken, Frankfurt, 1599. Tabula IX.*)

Barcia records that when Drake appeared the Governor retired to San Mateo, and that learning that Drake had gone on to Virginia, he decided to return. "He went by land with 200 soldiers to the town of St. Augustine, which he found reduced to ashes"—*que hallo reducida a cenizas*. "He brought back the inhabitants, sent for more people from San Mateo and began to rebuild or to build *de novo* the town of St. Augustine"—*y empoco a reedificar, o edificar de nuevo, la Ciudad de San Agustin*. (Ensayo Cronologico, page 163.)

Now that the ill-fated wooden town of 1586 has been burned in three languages, it is interesting to note that even in that far distant time St. Augustine had qualities which endeared it to its inhabitants and engaged their pens in its praise. Among the transcripts of Spanish manuscripts obtained by Miss Brooks in Seville is a letter written by Alonzo Santos Saez, from San Augustin de la Florida, the 11th day of July of the year 1586, and addressed to the King, in which he says: "I have to communicate sad news to Your Majesty—the arrival of the English Corsair, Francis Drake. . . After the enemy had consummated their object, they sailed away. We returned from the woods, and to our sorrow found nothing but ruin and destruction staring us in the face.

"This city being comparatively new, having been founded only a few years ago, was nevertheless one of the best situated and best populated, and comprised beautiful cultivated lands, also a variety of fruit trees, the equal of which was not to be found anywhere in the Indies. But all has been lost beyond recovery. We the inhabitants of this place had taken a special pride in cultivating and beautifying it, expecting to reap the fruits of our labors. We built houses which, although of wood, were very comfortable and quite expensive."

It is pleasant to recall thus the name of Alonzo Saez, prototype of the countless letter writers, who, from the date that it was "comparatively new" through the centuries to this present time when it is old, have celebrated the charms of St. Augustine.

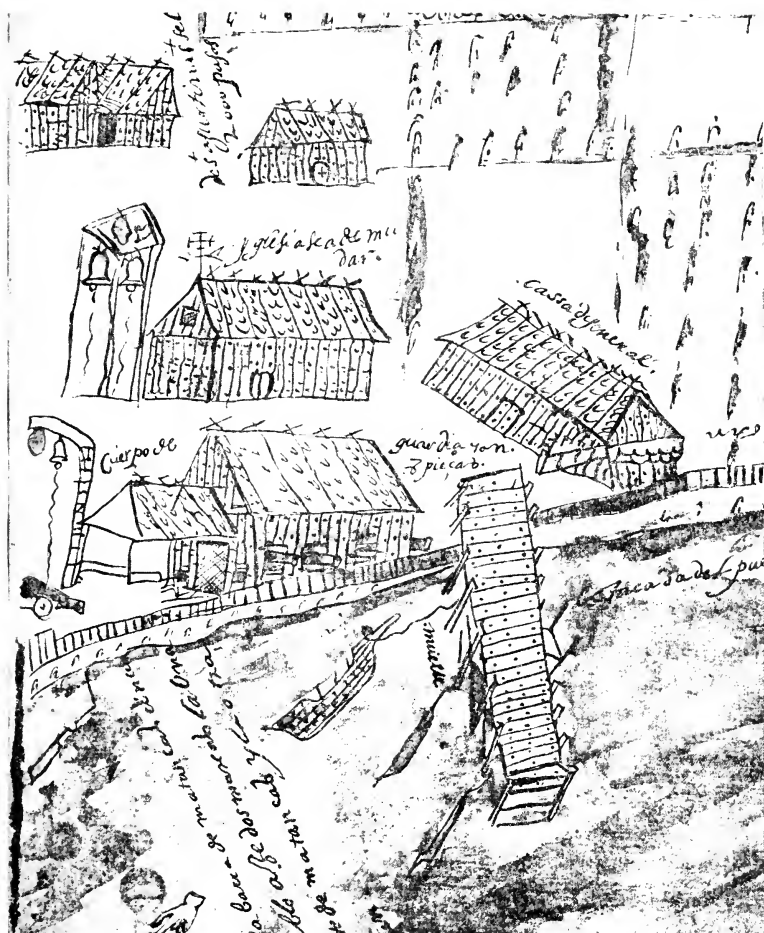
The new town which was built after Drake's raid, was built of wood, and wood was the building material employed for many years

afterward. The accompanying photo reproduction of a section of a map of St. Augustine, made in 1593, shows the building construction of that date—board sidings and thatched roofs. The General's house, the guard house, the church and other wood-and-thatch buildings are shown; but there is no hint of the deputy's coquina stone house, nor of "the larger coquina monastery across the street," which the Society tells us had been completed three years previously. The map was prepared for the King. One might think that H. M. would have been gratified to see something more substantial than these flimsy fire-traps.

In 1599 the church and the monastery which was actually here went up in smoke, and the Franciscans took refuge in the hospital. On February 25, 1600, Fray Blas de Montes wrote from St. Augustine to the King: "In other letters I have written to Your Majesty, I have given an account of the fire we had on the 14th of March of last year, 1599, in this city. Among other houses burned with the church was ours." (Unwritten History, page 57.) Again in 1605 monastery and church were burned, the monks this time going to the Hermitage of Our Lady of la Soledad, pending the provision of a new home. On December 26 of that year Governor Pedro de Ybarra wrote to the King: "I have now built another good church and house for these good fathers." St. Augustine roofs were still of palmetto, and Governor Ybarra was much worried about their inflammable nature and the fire peril. In the same letter he wrote: "There is another matter to which I give much of my attention, and that is to be able to make lumber shingles with which to cover the roofs of the houses." (Manuscript in Library of Congress. The Lowery Collection, page 114.)

Thus history, as recorded in books, letters and maps of the time, shows the absurdity of the Society's assertions about the antiquity of its house. Perhaps the Society holds with Henry Ford that "History is bunk." More likely it never suspected that such records were available to demonstrate the supreme silliness of its pretensions. At the meeting of the Board of Trade last winter following the publication of my article on the "Fakes of St. Augustine," the Vice-President of the Society made the naïve suggestion: "There has never been written a comprehensive history of Florida, and many of the claims made by all historians are based upon traditions."

Of the rich store of historical material relating to Florida and St. Augustine, the St. Augustine Historical Society appears blissfully ignorant. To supply the imagined deficiency it dispenses its own home-brew. Raw stuff. But the President says he likes it.



This is a photo reproduction (reduced) of a section of a map sent to the King in 1593—"Mapa del Pueblo, Fuerte y Caño de San Agustín de la Florida y del Pueblo y Caño de San Sebastián." The section here given covers the portion of the town just south of the Fort, which is shown on the map as a triangular work surrounded by circular defenses. There are shown the Church (Iglesia), the Guard House (Cuerpo de Guardia), and the General's House (Casa de General). The sketch was evidently intended to indicate for the King the principal buildings in his Florida town. Its significance for us lies in the information it gives of the style and material of construction employed at the period. The date, 1593, it should be remembered, was twenty-eight years after the year 1565, when the Historical Society says its stone house was built; and three years after 1590, when, it says, "the larger coquina monastery across the street" had been completed.

Claim D—That it has documents proving possession of the house in one family from 1590 to 1882.

St. Augustine has again and again been scourged by fire. In 1662 the pirate Davis burned the town. In 1702 Governor Moore of South Carolina after stealing the plate and ornaments of the church and driving all the inhabitants into the Fort, laid siege to the castle for three months, and then was "obliged to retreat, but not without first burning the town." (Report of the Committee of the South Carolina Assembly, July 1, 1741.) Barcia's account has the expressive phrase, *hecha Cineças la Ciudad*—"they made ashes of the city." (Ensayo Cronologico, page 320.)

That the Society's house if built in 1565 should have escaped destruction through all these successive conflagrations would have been only less remarkable than the preservation of the documents which the Society says it has, showing the possession of the house by one Spanish family from 1590 to 1882.

The Archives of St. Augustine have repeatedly been destroyed by fire, and those which have escaped destruction do not go back of the year 1702. This was set forth in a deposition by the keeper of the Archives, who in 1763, testified in the land case of John Gordon. (The Case of Mr. John Gordon, London, 1772, Exhibit XXII.)

If under such circumstance the Society has real estate records extending back to 1590, the documents must be counted as unique, and are to be classed among the rarest and most interesting of its possessions.

But has it the documents? Or are these too fakes? I am told that people in St. Augustine are asking this in a slightly different way. They say, "If the Historical Society has documents to answer the charges brought against it by Mr. Reynolds, why doesn't the Society produce the documents and answer the charges?" When one thinks about it, that is quite the natural question to ask.

The Society says its documents show that its house was in possession of the Spanish deputy's family from 1590 to 1882. From St. Augustine's beginning and for a long period the place was small, scantily peopled and poverty-stricken. It was essentially nothing more than a garrison town, a fortified post, occupied by a transient military population serving its terms of enlistment—here to-day and gone to-morrow. There was constantly recurring talk of abandoning the post. In 1593 Juan de Posada wrote to the home government advising its discontinuance. When the church and monastery were burned in 1599 Fray Blas de Montes wrote to the King that the money for the rebuilding would be held until it should be decided whether the garrison would remain here or be removed to some place more advantageous. So late as 1690 a proposal was submitted to the Spanish Ministers to translate

the post to Santa Maria de Galbe (Pensacola), so few were the inhabitants here and so hard the conditions of living. That under these circumstances a government official's family should have remained here and perpetuated its family line for 300 years would have been sufficiently improbable, even had St. Augustine during all that time continued to be a Spanish town. But it did not. On the contrary, there were successive changes of population and repeated summary race interruptions.

EXEUNT OMNES.

When Great Britain acquired possession of Florida, it was after almost a hundred years of racial enmity and warfare between the English of South Carolina and Georgia and the Spaniards of St. Augustine; and when the hated British came to occupy St. Augustine in 1763 the Spaniards went away. All went, including descendants of deputies' families. Don Melchor Feliu, Governor of San Augustin de la Florida, wrote to the Governor of Cuba: "I have the honor to report to you that on the 22nd of January last I sailed from that port with eight transports, having on board the rest of the inhabitants of that town, which, together with the troops of that garrison, reached the number of 3,104 persons. The zealous determination of the people of that town, so faithful in their desire to live under the dominion of His Majesty, was a matter of attention and wonder even to the British themselves. Their voluntarily exiling themselves from their native homes, with the sacrifice of all their property, firmly established at the same time their devotion to our religion and fidelity to H. M. . . . The entire population emigrated, leaving behind only three, who (as I informed you in my communication of the 7th of last month) had remained behind with my permission, to attend to the final disposition of some horses that were running loose in the neighborhood of the city of San Augustin. (Brooks Manuscripts, Library of Congress.)

Twenty years later, in 1783, the Spaniards returned and the English went away, there remaining only the Minorcans and Greeks and Italians, who had come up from New Smyrna during the British occupation. Thirty-eight years afterward, in 1821, the Spaniards went and the Americans came. Spanish, English, Spanish, American—this is the story of change told by the three flags which have floated over the Fort, each change of sovereignty and of race bringing an interruption of family descent.

Reading the history of St. Augustine is like reading a Shakespeare play; on every other page the scene closes or the act ends with *Exeunt omnes*.

Claim E—That traditions justify its assertions about the age of the house.

The Society has recently advanced a blanket claim that traditions justify its several assertions respecting the age of the house. In connection with the claim of documents showing the long possession of the house in the same family, it is pertinent to consider these traditions of which the Society now makes so much.

When I pointed out that the 1565 coquina house building monk story had no foundation in history, the Society rejoined that the tale was supported by traditions attaching to the house.

At the Society meeting of March 8, President Depew said: "We must remember that St. Augustine was founded 350 years ago, and for ages had no libraries or newspapers, which means that much of our history is based upon tradition handed down from father to son."

The resolution adopted at the meeting asserted the Society's faith that its statements about the house were "as near the facts as true lovers of history can establish from meagre historical records and priceless traditions handed down from father to son." (Evening Record, March 9.)

But the handing down of traditions from father to son through St. Augustine's three centuries of change would have been impossible, because, as has just been shown, there was no continued succession of fathers and sons from whom, to whom, by whom and through whom the handing down could have been done. The Society's traditions have an air of extemporaneousness, not to say freshness. They recall a sign in a grocery window: "Fresh eggs laid to order. Leave your order." The traditions appear to have been laid to order. But the quality of freshness is of variable virtue; we demand it in eggs, but look askance at it in traditions. Whether old or new does not matter. Tradition is superfluous.

The Society's recourse to traditions to bolster up its case is wholly unnecessary. It says it has documents proving possession of the house in the same family from 1590 to 1882. A shred of such documentary evidence would be worth all the traditions the glib-tongued lecturers could spiel. If it has the documents, then, why doesn't it produce them?

The old residents of St. Augustine had never heard of any such traditions until the fakers came to town. Said Dr. Andrew Anderson in his Armistice Day address last November: "To my knowledge there never was a slave sold in it [the Plaza Market]. In those days before the Civil War I never heard of the existence of a Ponce de Leon spring, nor of a burning spring, nor of an oldest house, nor of a slave market, nor of a Huguenot Cemetery."

THE HOUSE WAS NOT HERE IN 1778.

Our examination of the historical records has shown us that in 1565, when the Society claims its house was built by Franciscan monks, there were here no monks, no known coquina, no St. Augustine.

We now come to later and documentary evidence bearing on the inquiry. First and most important is the British Crown grant of the lot on which the house stands.

The Treaty of Paris in 1763, by which Great Britain acquired Florida, provided that the Spanish lands which should be abandoned, or the owners of which should not take the oath of allegiance, should become the property of the British Sovereign. By the operation of this rule, the St. Francis street lot then passed into the possession of King George III. Here was a certain break in title from any original grantee, whether the Society's Spanish deputy of 1590 or another. From King George III. the lot was transferred to Joseph Peavett by Crown grant in 1778. The instrument of the grant was for a long time in the possession of the late Miss Nica Llambias, who lived on St. Francis street. Mrs. Averette's statement of the terms of the grant was printed in my article on "The Fakes of St. Augustine," as follows:

"It was originally part of a grant given by George III. to Joseph Peavett, and is called in the grant 'Town lot No. 9, Society Quarter.' The grant is recorded in the Register's office in England, Book D, Fol. 2, pages 46 and 47, May 1st, 1779, and is entered in the Auditor's office Book A, page 2, Aug. 12th, 1781.

"The grant provides that the grantee must pay yearly and every year one peppercorn if demanded; that he must build within three years next after the date, July 16, 1778, one good and sufficient tenantable house with brick chimney at least, and of the dimensions of 24 feet in length in front and at least 16 feet in breadth or depth. If the lot was not built on in that time, the grantee and his heirs must pay to the Crown £1 yearly and every year until the house was completely finished. If not finished in ten years, the lot granted must revert to the Crown. The instrument was given under the Great Seal of East Florida by Gov. Patrick Tonyn, July 16th, 1778." Mrs. Averette has written me that she took these details from the original document, when Miss Llambias had it. W. W. Dewhurst, Esq., of St. Augustine, who has seen the original grant itself, informs me that the details as printed are correct—"the grant in terms requires that the grantee must build within three years next after July 16th, 1778, one good and sufficient tenantable house." And he adds that the plot accompanying the grant "shows a large vacant lot fronting on St. Francis street and bounded east by an open space facing the water."

The fact that the plot of the grant shows a vacant lot, and the stipu-

lation in the grant that a house must be built on the lot to perfect the title, would seem to indicate that the Society's house built by the Franciscan monks in 1565 and the home of many Spanish and English families was not standing here in 1778.

The history of the original document of the Peavett grant is interesting. It passed to Geronimo Alvarez when he acquired the lot, and in later years was one of the treasured possessions of Miss Nica Llambias, a niece of Antonio Alvarez. (Incidentally, Mrs. Averette has told me that Miss Llambias was much exercised over the misrepresentations made about the age of her uncle's house, and often so expressed herself to Mrs. Averette.)

In 1910, when the subject of St. Augustine's oldest houses was under discussion, Mrs. Averette published the foregoing terms of the grant in the St. Augustine Evening Record, and said that shortly before that time the document had been stolen from Miss Llambias. Again in 1918, when the Society was considering the purchase of the oldest house business, Mrs. Averette sent to the Society the same statement of the terms of the Peavett grant, to show that as to age the house was not what was claimed for it. Mr. Dewhurst tells me that since that time the original document itself, bearing the Great Seal of the Province of East Florida, has been sent to the Society, having been mailed to it anonymously. Unless then the Society has made some disposition of the paper, it has long had and now has in its own possession unanswerable documentary evidence that its house was not built by Franciscan monks in 1565.

WHEN WAS THE HOUSE BUILT?

This examination of the historical and documentary evidence in the case having shown that the claims of the St. Augustine Historical Society are fictitious, I am not called on to determine actually when the house was built. Such records as are available will give the approximate date.

During the British occupation, in the year 1778, as we have seen, the vacant lot was acquired by Joseph Peavett. It afterward passed to John Hudson, for the Spanish archives received by the United States at the cession in 1821 show that when the abandoned property of the English was sold by the Spanish Government in 1783 this lot was sold as the property of John Hudson and was bought by Geronimo Alvarez, who was of a Greek family which had come to St. Augustine from New Smyrna in British times. Mr. Alvarez remained in St. Augustine after the cession to the United States in 1821, and continued to hold the property.

Mr. Dewhurst tells me that in 1831 the tax assessor valued the small lot at the corner of Charlotte and St. Francis streets at \$1,800; the

small lot between that one and the Alvarez lot at \$400, and this large Alvarez lot at \$300, a value which would indicate either that there was no house on it, or that any house must have been a very poor one. The original appraisal signed by Antonio Alvarez and Andrew Anderson is in the office of the St. Johns County Abstract Company.

Some time prior to 1834, the stone of the old powder magazine south of where the Flagler Hospital is now was sold by the War Department. A purchaser of building material at this sale was either Geronimo Alvarez or his son Antonio. The fair assumption is, and I am told that the current belief among the old residents of St. Augustine in the 1880's was, that this stone was used by Mr. Alvarez to build his St. Francis street house. While the data here afforded do not fix the date precisely, they do lead to the conclusion that the house was built between 1831 and 1834. In 1839 Geronimo Alvarez deeded the property to his son Antonio, from whom it descended to his granddaughter, Mrs. Acosta, by whose administrator it was sold in 1882 to William Duke.

A STRAIN OF PURE CASTILIAN BLOOD.

This brings us to the close of the term of possession from 1590 to 1882, during which the Society says its documents show that the house descended from the Spanish deputy "in the same family." As we have just seen, among the owners within that term were George III, Joseph Peavett, John Hudson, Geronimo Alvarez, Antonio Alvarez and his grand-daughter Mrs. E. A. Acosta.

The Society says that these owners were all "in the same family" of the Spanish deputy. This would mean that the German George III and the English Joseph Peavett and John Hudson must have been descendants of the Spanish deputy of 1590; and the Greek Geronimo Alvarez and his descendants to 1882 must have descended from the Spanish deputy, the German George III, the English Joseph Peavett and the English John Hudson. The "Oldest" was some melting pot.

However absurd this variegated lineage of the one family possession fake, it is no more absurd than the oldest house fake as a whole. And that is no more absurd than that St. Augustine should stand for the thing, or that last winter when I had denounced the sundry Oldest House fakes, the Fountain of Youth fake, the Ponce de Leon Mission fake, the Slave Market fake and the Huguenot Cemetery fake, an indignant member of the Board of Trade should have written to me: "I do feel, as do scores of others here, that you have been unfair to every business interest in St. Augustine by your attacks upon our greatest asset—our history and cherished traditions."

WHEN THE HOUSE BECAME "THE OLDEST."

At the sale by order of the court in 1882, the property was bought by William Duke, who afterwards conveyed it to the wife of Charles P. Carver. Dr. Carver enlarged the building and added the tower room, put in the colored glass windows from the old Presbyterian Church, decorated the exterior with sea shells of a form venerated by some savage tribes, set up in the yard the plaster casts from the Howard place, gave out that the house was the oldest in the United States, exacted from tourists an admission fee to inspect it as such, and thus by his ingenuity and showman's enterprise converted what not long before had been an unprofitable negro tenement into an easy money producer. It is said that he paid off the mortgage with the fake "oldest house" proceeds.

From Dr. Carver the house passed into the possession of J. W. Henderson, who continued the business of oldest house. The Hendersons dug the well in the yard which the Society shows as a wishing well "blessed by the Franciscan Monks." Then George Reddington ran the place. In 1918 he sold the business to the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science.

THE SOCIETY AND THE HOUSE.

Prior to this, during the life of Dr. De Witt Webb, founder of the Society and its president until his death, it was at one time proposed that the Society should take over the house and conduct it as the oldest house. He spurned the proposition as a fraud of which the Society could not be guilty. What was written in the article on the "Fakes of St. Augustine" may be repeated here: "The St. Augustine Historical Society was organized in 1884, chiefly by the efforts of Dr. De Witt Webb, who until his death was its president and guiding spirit. His portrait occupies a prominent place in the Society's house. If the Society were minded to do Dr. Webb's memory justice, it might well post a notice in connection with the portrait, setting forth the fact that when fire had destroyed the Society's former home and it was proposed to take the St. Francis street house and continue its exploitation as the oldest house (as has been done since his death) he indignantly denounced the scheme as involving a deception of the public the Society could not be party to."

Under the new management the business thrived. The prestige of the title of "Historical Society" naturally served to strengthen the faith of the dupes who heard and believed the 1565 building date and the monk story. The St. Augustine Evening Record, which erstwhile had printed letters from visitors who thought themselves fooled, now

gave its own unqualified endorsement of the institution. In announcing the Society's acquisition of the business, it said: "There is no question about the antiquity of this old building, as the Historical Society fully investigated its claims to being the oldest house in the United States before considering the purchase. . . Much time and money has been expended in attempts to secure reliable data about the date that the old house was erected. The British Museum in London has been consulted and the Federal archives at Washington and elsewhere have been probed, the result satisfying the Historical Society that there is no building in the United States that antedates this time-worn structure. The old building was at one time owned by the Franciscan monks, who came here under the Spanish regime." And of the trumpery collection of antiques it said: "Under the Historical Society the exhibit of interesting relics will have an official stamp of accuracy that the public may accept as reliable." (St. Augustine Evening Record, Nov. 16, 1918.)

To this was added the official endorsement by the City Commission of the City of St. Augustine. This is displayed in the house, and is printed in the circular distributed to tourists. It is Resolution No. 116, "adopted in open session of the Commission this 17th day of December, A. D. 1918," and reads: "Be It Resolved, That the City Commission in meeting assembled do request and recommend to tourists a visit to the Old House on St. Francis street." (Society's circular.)

The Evening Record's endorsement and the City Commission's recommendation and request to visit the place were given wide currency in circulars distributed to tourists. Drivers, chauffeurs, and sightseeing cars were paid so much a head for visitors brought to the place. Picture cards and books illustrating the house and the "antiques" were by the agency of the tourist disseminated throughout the land. The fame of the oldest house was spread abroad, and visitors flocked to it. In the season from November, 1918, to May, 1919, there were 19,000 visitors; and in that from November, 1919, to May, 1920, the register showed 23,000 "ground through" the house, as the attendants express it. The visitors are not confined to winter tourists. In a single mid-summer month, July of 1920, the Record reported, "950 people were shown through the Oldest House on St. Francis street, which is the home of the St. Augustine Historical Society. The visitors' register at the Oldest House indicates that they come from far distant sections of the country, from Maine to California, and from nearby points, little towns throughout Georgia and Florida." (Record, Aug. 10, 1920.) To-day the Society's oldest house on St. Francis street is the most successful and best-known fäke of St. Augustine.

SOME OF THE ANTIQUES.

THE PONCE DE LEON KNOCKER.

If the gold casket is of lead, the gems in it are likely to be paste. The house is stuffed full of antiques, which the Evening Record assures us may be accepted as genuine because the Society says they are; but our credulity is strained to the breaking point at the very entrance by the knocker on the door, of which the Society says in its Souvenir Booklet: "On the front door of the house is a large solid brass knocker which adorned the door of Juan Ponce de Leon's palace at Seville, Spain, at the time of his discovery of Florida. It was brought from Spain in 1891 by a member of the Historical Society. An affidavit proving its antiquity may be seen in the house."

But Ponce had no palace in Seville. Born in Leon in 1460, as soon as he was old enough to handle an arquebus, as was the way with all good Spaniards of his time he went into the fight against the Moors, and fought until the fall of Granada in 1492. In 1493 he sailed with Columbus to America. In 1501 we find him serving under Ovando in Hispaniola. There he married, there his children Luis and Leonora and another daughter were born, and he lived on his estates there until 1509, when he became Governor of the Island of Porto Rico. He moved his family to Porto Rico in that year, built a house at Caparra, near the present San Juan, and made his home there until 1513, when he sailed from San German, Porto Rico, on the voyage which brought him to Florida. Thus probably for twenty years, and certainly for twelve years, he had lived in the West Indies prior to and up to the time when he sailed for Florida. If the knocker ever sounded its alarm on a palace door in the Seville night, it was not for Juan Ponce de Leon that the sleepy *portero* opened the door. If the knocker is not of solid brass, it ought to be.

THE LIVING ROOM FIREPLACE.

A feature of one of the rooms is the fireplace, of which the Society's souvenir booklet says: "In the main living room is a very large open fireplace, which now as in the days of long ago radiates a cheerful glow on cool days." But according to the books, in the days of long ago they did not have fireplaces in St. Augustine.

When the shipwrecked Quaker Jonathan Dickenson reached St. Augustine on a bitterly cold day in 1696, the refugees, he relates, were received into the Governor's House, and "seeing how extream cold we were, he gave us a cup of Spanish wine and sent us into his Kitchen to warm ourselves at the Fire." And again, when clothing had been provided, "we put on the linen and made all Haste into the Kitchen to the Fire." (God's Protecting Providence, page 92.) If the Gov-

ernor's house in 1696 did not have a fireplace at which the frigid refugees could warm themselves in such weather (Dickenson records "ice half an Inch thick" the next morning), it is improbable that the monks of St. Francis should have enjoyed that solace in their house in the hard winter of 1565-6, when Menendez recorded such suffering here from the cold.

The writers in British times recorded that chimneys were introduced by the English.

Wm. Stork (1769) wrote: "The winters are so mild that the Spaniards at Augustine had neither chimneys in their houses nor glass windows." (Description of East Florida, page 2.)

Wm. De Brahm, Surveyor-General (1765), wrote: "No house has any chimney or fireplace. The Spaniards made use of stone urns, filled them with coals left in their kitchens in the afternoon, and set them at sunset in their bedrooms to defend themselves against those winter seasons which required such care." (Manuscript in Library of Harvard University.)

Romans (1775) wrote: "Till the arrival of the English, neither glass windows nor chimneys were known here." (History of Florida, page 262.)

The Hessian surgeon Johann Schoepf here in 1784 wrote: "The houses are built quite after the Spanish fashion, with flat roofs and few windows. Here and there the English have houses with more windows, especially on the street side. They also built the first chimneys, for the Spanish formerly were content with no more than a charcoal fire placed under a tapestry hung table." (Reise durch einige der mittlern und südlichen Vereinigten Nordamerikanischen Staaten nach Ost-Florida und den Bahama-Inseln. Morrison's translation, Vol. II, 229.)

The fact that a house has a fireplace to radiate a cheerful glow is presumptive evidence that the house was built after the British took over St. Augustine. Nevertheless, it may be that its fireplace is one thing about which the Historical Society has told the truth. For "the days of long ago" is a relative term, particularly with reference to fireplaces. It may refer back to the monks' house of 1565, or it may not go beyond the lives of living men. For when one recalls in after years the group about the fireplace in the old home, there needs have been no long lapse of time to give the picture place far back in "the days of long ago." If we thus measure the phrase, not by historical periods, but by individual experience, it may perhaps be conceded that this one claim is valid.

THE MONKS' PRIE-DIEU OF 1565.

In the large room upstairs, which the sign on the wall says "was a chapel used by the Franciscan monks from 1565 to 1590," is a prie-dieu

"used by the Franciscan monks during their occupancy of this house." In these things, the Society assures us, "millions of pious people are interested."

Perhaps it is because the pious are interested, that the Society representatives at the Fort expatiate on Inquisition tortures, racks with skeletons chained to them, and a quicksand well to swallow down the victims.

THE LAFAYETTE-WASHINGTON TABLE.

If millions of pious people are interested in the Society's religious fakes, millions of patriotic people presumably are interested in its faked Stars and Stripes. No squeamishness restrains the Society from employing a spurious American flag in one of its fakes. Among the antiques is shown a "Masonic table presented to Washington by Lafayette." It is decorated with portraits of George and Martha Washington and the Marquis. Mrs. Washington once said of the multitudinous portraits of Washington, that while they had a common merit of in some certain respect resembling one another, none of them looked like George. Of this one she would have said that it didn't even resemble. Contemplating the grotesque caricature, one marvels that Lafayette should have sent it to his friend and expected the friendship to continue.

The star feature of the table—a fake within a fake—is the American flag of Washington's time here shown as having forty-one stars in the field. That would not fool a St. Augustine school boy (though the boy, observing this thriving oldest house scheme, might draw mistaken conclusions as to the need of honesty in business). Had Lafayette sent a flag to his old commander, it would have had the thirteen stars of the banner under which they had fought, or at the most the fifteen stars of the flag of 1795, in which year the Society says the table was presented. When was the table actually made? Presumably when there were forty-one States in the Union and forty-one stars in the flag, which would have been in 1889, after Montana had been admitted as the forty-first State. But this is idle surmise and unprofitable conjecture, when St. Augustine offers us so many things so much better worth finding out than the true date of a St. Francis street fake antique. The only word to add is one of wonder that President Depew, who so often and so eloquently has orated about his country's flag, should permit his Historical Society to exhibit in its house and illustrate in its books and sell on its post-cards this vulgar travesty of an American flag on a bogus antique. George Washington hated a lie. He would have scorned this fraud and resented the association of his name with it. The name of Washington, the honor of the flag, religion—nothing is respected by these mercenary fakers.

MASONIC TABLE PRESENTED TO WASHINGTON BY LAFAYETTE,



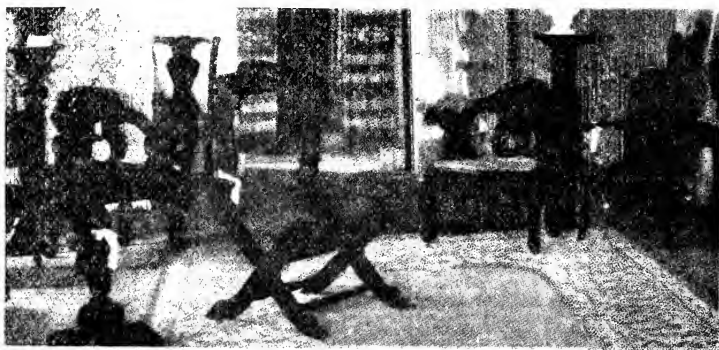
OLDEST HOUSE.

The illustrations of the 41-starred flag of Washington's time and the Prie-dieu of 1565 are copied with their mendacious titles from the Society's booklet, "Two Oldest Relics in the United States."

THE WELL THE MONKS BLESSED.

One of the "traditions," not "handed down from father to son," but handed out to tourists, is the story of the monk-blessed wishing well. A reference to the well was contained in a letter which Mr. M. S. Averette wrote me under date of March 28, 1921: "J. W. Henderson, who used to own the St. Francis street property, had a son Jay, who was one of my companions in St. Augustine. I well remember that Jay told me that his mother had had the well dug which now they use as a wishing well, and he told me too how some one had fallen into the well before it was curbed.

What Mr. Averette says about the well might be construed as casting suspicion on the Society's assertion that it had been "blessed by the monks," but as no remote date is claimed for the blessing, and as the monks of 1565-1590 are not specified, it might have been that some monks visiting St. Augustine after Mrs. Henderson had had the well dug bestowed their blessing upon it. Perhaps the unlucky wight who fell into the hole was a wandering monk who blessed it fervidly then and there, and wished himself well out of it. When one considers how many simple folk have peered into the well and wished a wish to be "granted within a year," one is inclined to indulge them the harmless delusion and to own that the story of the monkish blessing may be as authentic as are those which go with the "large solid brass knocker, which adorned the door of the Ponce de Leon palace at Seville;" the praying bench "used by the Franciscan monks during their occupancy of this house;" the sundry antiques the method of manufacture of which tells the trained eye of the wood-worker that they were produced at dates later than those specified in their labels; and the "Masonic table presented to Washington by Lafayette."



CHAPEL, SHOWING IN FOREGROUND PRIE DIEU USED BY THE MONKS IN THIS ROOM.

THE CONCLUSIONS FROM THE INQUIRY.

I have given such historical facts with deductions and inferences drawn from them as bear on the question at issue.

It has been found—

That in 1565 there were no monks here;
That the coquina building stone was unknown;
And that St. Augustine occupied another site.

The results of the inquiry lead to the conclusion that the Society's claim of great antiquity for its building is unfounded, untrue and untenable.

St. Augustine has had an eventful and romantic history, but in that history the house has had no recorded part. Nor do any traditions attach to it, not even of great age, for there are other houses here which are known to be older. The story that it was built in 1565 by the monks of St. Francis is a fiction of recent invention, invented and told for revenue only. The tens of thousands of tourists who have paid their admission fees to see the "oldest house" have been hoaxed. The age of three and a half centuries ascribed to the house is a fraud. The taking of money from visitors under the false pretense of showing them "the oldest house in the United States" is a swindle.

THE OTHER ST. AUGUSTINE.

To say, as has been said, that the city's attraction for tourists depends in any degree on oldest house and kindred fakes, is an insult to St. Augustine. Untold thousands of visitors were attracted to the old town and found their pleasure here before ever the St. Francis street fakers faked their fakes. Other untold thousands will come long after the fakers shall have lived their little hour and been forgotten.

For these vulgar and impudent deceptions, engendered of ignorance and cupidity, are not the real things that count in St. Augustine. No more do those who invent and exploit and abet and defend the frauds truly represent the city.

The visitor may be "ground through" the St. Francis street house, Fort Marion and the Ponce de Leon mission, imbibe the parrot lectures and go away with a head stuffed full of misinformation about a fanciful St. Augustine and its past. But there is another St. Augustine of which he will have learned little or nothing—the place of genuine historic interest and truly romantic associations. When he realizes that he has been duped, he may look on the town as one given over to fakes. But, in this respect also, there is another St. Augustine (if not of to-day, nevertheless of yesterday and of to-morrow), a St. Augustine abhorrent of deceptions and intolerant of those who practice them.

The vendors of fakes, who have strayed in from other parts and set up shop here, do not represent the real personality of the community.

A Historical Society, ignorant of the history of its own city, and giving out grotesque fabrications as historic truths, does not represent the intelligent many who are familiar with that history and disgusted by the Society's perversions of it.

Intelligent residents know that the oldest houses, the fountains of youth and the Ponce de Leon missions are frauds. Self-respecting men and women resent the exploitation of the swindles and would gladly see the town rid of them. Such a feeling was expressed in letters which came to me from Dr. Anderson, Dr. Bigler, Mr. Dismukes, Mr. Calhoun, Mr. Dewhurst, Archbishop Curley, then Bishop of St. Augustine, and others, following the publication of my article in Mr. Foster's Travel Magazine and the first edition of this booklet. Their sentiment represented an element of the community which is not represented truly nor at all by those members of the Board of Trade, themselves ignorant and gullible, who defend the fakes as business interests; nor is the intelligence of St. Augustine represented by the Evening Record when it supports the Historical Society's preposterous pretensions.

The attitude of the individual depends largely upon the measure of one's self-respect, since a sensitive respect for one's self involves a respect for one's home town and requires that the town shall deserve the respect

of its own people and that of the outside world. No high-minded, right-thinking, self-respecting man or woman living here is willing to have St. Augustine known as a harborer of fakers and mecca of fakees, with oldest houses for the gullible and fountains of youth for the feeble-minded. When the city shall be freed from these disgusting frauds, as some day it will be, the cleansing will have been brought about by the assertion of that self-respect on the part of the many, which in such larger expression we speak of as civic pride.

An obligation rests on all citizens to cherish the town's civic self-respect. It is an obligation which may be evaded least of all by business men to whom the city gives opportunity and reward; a sorry return do any such make who abet the degrading frauds. A similar obligation rests on those who not being citizens return with successive winters to enjoy the advantages of living here; with very ill-grace indeed may any such repay St. Augustine's welcome by making flippant apologies for the fake mongers or constituting themselves oratorical sponsors for the fakes which bring reproach on the city.

The St. Augustine of this later time asks no more, and surely should be given no less, than the St. Augustine of 1586 received from its people, who, as Alonzo Santos Saez wrote, took a "special pride in cultivating and beautifying" the town. The beautifying which it should be the special pride of its people to bestow upon St. Augustine to-day consists not alone in that material and external beauty, which in such surpassing measure it has; but in the beauty, as we'll, of the qualities which characterize it as a community and determine its repute and the honor of its name.

CHARLES B. REYNOLDS.

130 West 42d Street, New York, December, 1921.



The Facts vs. the Fables

*From the Armistice Day Address of Dr. Andrew Anderson,
St. Augustine, November 11, 1921.*

"To my knowledge there never was a slave sold in it (the Plaza market).

"In those days before the Civil War I never heard of the existence of a Ponce de Leon Spring, nor a Burning Spring, nor of an oldest house, nor of a slave market, nor of a Huguenot Cemetery. . . The cemetery just outside the City Gates was deeded to the trustees of the Presbyterian Church, of whom my father was one, by the Rev. T. Alexander, in 1832, for the use of the Protestants of the City.

"That I have some right to speak of these things, I may say that my father came here in 1829. He lived in an old Spanish house, which stood on the present site of the St. George Hotel. My mother drove through the City Gates in 1832 in the first four-wheeled vehicle ever seen here. They both lived and died and I was born here, and I now speak of some things of which I know. These springs and oldest houses and slave markets and Huguenot cemeteries are all new things.

"It is known to me that one house may be older than another, but where there are no records, who shall say which is the oldest? Oldest houses are getting to be as thick as flies, and we are being made ridiculous in the eyes of intelligent people. We are becoming a laughing stock. Why not label every old house, 'This is an old house,' and let it go at that? The learned hack-drivers who go about the city, stuffing gullible tourists with absurd stories, are no credit to us. St. Augustine has a background and has a history and is dignified by it. Let us not diminish its dignity by making it a catch-penny town."

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